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Planning and governance issues in the restructuring of the high street

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the role of “restructuring” in confronting the challenges facing contemporary high streets in the devolved UK. It complements three articles concerned with repositioning, reinventing and rebranding and illustrates the multi-faceted approaches involved in addressing retail change and town centre transformations. This paper emphasises the role of planning and governance in effecting change.

Design/methodology/approach – Informed by a literature review, action research involved inter-related interventions in selected locations, and associated workshops with engaged practitioners and community actors.

Findings – The findings highlight that the “resilience” of contemporary town centres demands resisting efforts to return to the status quo and necessitate forms of adaptive management. Understanding high street degeneration and the limitations of a retail-only led policy focus as a “wicked issue” further demands socially constructing town centres as an ecosystem requiring a holistic response. New forms of joint-working involve selecting appropriate models, attending to relational aspects and defined roles and responsibilities. Land use planning, including masterplanning and creating evidenced policy options, provides an important democratic space for legitimising action, offering leadership and extending participation to new change agents.

Practical implications – Restructuring of governance is an essential prerequisite in effecting change.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in the application of the restructuring element of the 4 Rs Framework which enables a focus on the governance dimensions of town centre and high street regeneration. The findings are enhanced through the experiential evidence which stresses both the importance of place-based diversification and value of prioritising holistic and joint actions developed through participatory visioning exercises.

Keywords Resilience, Governance, Joint working, Restructuring, Holistic, Wicked issue

Paper type Research paper

Recent evidence into the state of the UK’s high streets and retail-oriented centres details the extent to which the retail environment has evolved over time – and continues to be subject to changing conditions (WYG Planning, 2016). As this special issue reporting on the findings of



the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study, High Street UK 2020, highlights, explanations of the underlying causes and triggers of retail transformation and wider high street environmental change vary quite considerably (Parker *et al.*, 2017). For example, studies have pointed to a number of clarifications of these dynamics, which include local economic factors (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014); social conditions, such as demographic and cultural diversification (Worpole and Knox, 2007); environmental and place qualities, including historical character (Historic England, 2013); technological developments (Scottish Government, 2013); shifting consumer expectations (Hart *et al.*, 2014) and retailer responses (Findlay and Sparks, 2008); and differentiated political and ideological agendas to prioritise town centres (National Assembly for Wales, 2012). Conditions – and explanations, however – are not only contested but also context specific. Attention must be paid to the specificities of place and to the underlying power relations between the different interests involved. Networks of relationships intersect corporate, governmental, consumer and civil dynamics as the constituent sectors in high street dynamics go beyond mere retailing and shopping and involve the different motivations and behaviours of a diverse range of actors (de Nisco *et al.*, 2008). In seeking to explain and understand the complex and evolving processes of change and place trajectories, it is important to acknowledge therefore that causes and effects are variously affected by geographical realities and spatial relations (Peel and Lloyd, 2016). As a consequence, retailing and high streets change in ways that vary across both time and space.

The fundamental nature of high street change in the UK may be characterised as comprising a place-based and systemic “economic restructuring” of locations, including the scalar realities of regional facilities, town and city centres and smaller neighbourhood centres (Doak, 2009). In terms of the land use planning system, for example, retail policy has tended to be concerned with identifying hierarchical provision of retail facilities (Peel, 2003). In practice, however, the well-being of the retail sector involves a screed of inter-related dynamics of an assortment of sectors, including banking, hospitality and distributional activities (Roderick MacLean Associates Ltd, 2013). These different sectors have themselves also transformed in terms of the nature of their location and delivery requirements. In short, new parameters are being created for high streets and retailing which require new behaviours, understandings and forms of action. As a consequence, academic and policy attention has turned to considering the appropriate ways in which the multi-dimensional characteristics of high streets and town centres may be assisted to respond to fundamental transformational shifts. In effect, a “planning and governance restructuring” strategy is required which can better address the complex nature of local high street and town centre change in response to these transforming external conditions.

This paper contends that this new *restructuring* approach must involve planning and governance arrangements which are relatively more sensitive, and multi-faceted, to respond to the complex and contested changes occurring at the level of high streets and town centres. Understood in this way, it will be argued that *restructuring* comprises, and, moreover, can serve to facilitate, elements of high street resilience (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2015). As this special issue illustrates, this can involve improved *repositioning* (Millington and Ntounis, 2017); the approach focussed upon understanding change and responsiveness to future changes. Moreover, a sensitivity to *restructuring* involves parallel efforts at *reinventing* (Theodiris *et al.*, 2017) the high street through extending and varying the offer with new initiatives, such as pop-ups, alternative land uses and enhancing consumer convenience (Deloitte, 2013) as part of collaborative place-making efforts. A concerted focus on *rebranding* (Kavaratzis and Ntounis, 2017) to articulate a shared appreciation of the need to coordinate, communicate and promote a commitment to sustained change is also

necessary as part of a multi-pronged and mutually reinforcing approach to the revitalisation of a place's identity and image. The role of a new *restructuring* strategy is to incorporate these elements as part of a revised planning and governance framework. Thus, the focus of this article is to critically reflect on the planning and governance issues involved in high street and town centre change, and to offer some recommendations with respect to restructuring.

The case for a new restructuring strategy based on planning and governance is driven, in part, by critiques of conventional land use planning not supporting and enabling town centres, and high streets in particular, to remain economically viable and socially vital (Jones, 2014). Over time, established land use planning practice has, for example, reversed a policy emphasis on allowing major out-of-town retail developments and promoted the idea of the "sequential test" approach in determining the physical location of retail provision and well-being of town and city centres. It has been argued that, in practice, however, the wider goals of this locational policy priority have not always materialised (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2014). Hence, conventional statutory planning has tended to be held culpable both for the decline of the traditional high street and the over-supply of out-of-town shopping facilities. Given the emergent parameters of external influence, such as internet shopping, this paper contends that town centres must be understood as complex and contested places, experiencing fundamental processes of change which require new mind-sets of understanding and new approaches, based on vision, partnership working and leadership (Hambleton, 2015). Importantly, then, planning and governance restructuring rests on understanding power, ownership, control, influence, responsibilities and joint-working in defined high streets and town centres.

This paper synthesises literature pertinent to "restructuring", mainly from a planning and governance perspective. First, it maps the waves of economic restructuring which have altered the context for retail-oriented high streets. This section introduces the theoretical concepts of resilience and wicked issues as useful in understanding high street change. Second, the paper introduces social reconstruction as a way to understand and explain ongoing high street change and interprets these in relation to the 4 Rs Framework (Parker *et al.*, 2017), which has evolved as part of this ESRC-funded study. Third, the paper considers the nature of the new planning and governance regime required to address the consequences of change. The discussion section is informed by the practical experiences and insights drawn from the towns that focused on restructuring as a way to improve vitality and viability. These experiences were obtained via the engaged scholarship approach implemented in this project (Ntounis and Parker, 2017), which saw project participants very much as producers as well as consumers of knowledge. Specific attention is paid to the role of the land use planning system and town centre policies in effecting change. Finally, the paper pulls out some recommendations in relation to the challenge of restructuring and reflects on likely future challenges and parameters to the planning and management of high streets and town centres.

Economic restructuring: waves of change

The literature review undertaken for the High Street UK 2020 project identified a number of complex changes affecting the nature of retail, retail performance and the wider dynamics of place (Parker *et al.*, 2017). The changing nature of retail is a long-established characteristic, with Schiller (2001), for example, identifying the sector as subject to successive waves of change. It is sobering to note that his original observations pre-dated the impact of e-tailing, m-tailing and new home delivery distributional options. The subsequent effects of globalisation, international trading relationships and shifts in ownership and control of

retailing activities have worked their way through to individual localities. These factors, combined with business cycles and differentiated economic recession and recovery, and deflated consumer spending, have contributed to structural change in retailing and associated physical effects on the high street.

Over and above these fundamental shifts in high street circumstances, changing ideologies have had an effect on economic rebalancing, the importance of the consumer (shopping) economy, and retailing as a specific sector. Differential performance in mobility, wealth and consumerism also contribute to powerful forces of change with respect to householder spend (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015) and the capacity of individual local authorities to influence the fortunes of their high streets and town centres. Attention must then be paid to the social divisions associated with a new moral economy based on market assertiveness. The role of debt, for example, is a characteristic of modern communities and will prove to have a longer-term effect on resilience (Milne and Rankine, 2013). Taken as a whole, change may be understood as both persistent, in the sense that change is continuous, and disruptive, in that unexpected shocks, such as the closure of a major anchor store, might occur, and which demand timely and coordinated responses. Here, the notion of *resilience* is helpful in exploring how a town centre or high street responds to such pressures. Generally, resilience is defined as “the degree to which a certain system is able to tolerate financial, ecological, social and/or cultural change before reorganising around a new set of structures and processes” (Kärholm *et al.*, 2014, p. 121). This concept is nuanced in practice as the term has expanded beyond an engineering interpretation of returning to the status quo – or bouncing back – to meanings which instead emphasise adaptation and anticipatory capacity to deal with changing contexts (Folke, 2006). Understanding of natural environments as dynamic and inter-dependent has focused attention on human systems of governance and led to the development of the concept of social-ecological resilience which then demands attention is paid to related systems of governance (Lloyd *et al.*, 2013). Translating these insights to town centres and high streets encourages an appreciation of high streets as inter-related systems possessing eco-systemic qualities. This demands appropriate forms of planning and governance, which can help high streets develop retail resilience and absorb the changes, crises and shocks of retailing that challenge the system’s equilibrium in a sustainable way (Fernandes and Chamusca, 2014; Rao and Summers, 2016).

This broader context is of significance for the restructuring of high streets, but not all change is retail-led, due to the inter-linkages of land and property markets in urban settings of all scales. What happens, for example, in the office sector with respect to decentralisation, expansion of home-working and the development of back-office and new technology has direct ramifications for footfall and expenditure by lunchtime office workers. Off-centre location of services and co-location of service functions directly reduces potential accessibility to retailing and other high street services. This outcome is further exacerbated by the relocation and privatisation of public services, including police, post offices, health facilities and banks, which, taken together, weaken what was perceived as the traditional fabric and synergy of the “down town”. Closure of community facilities, such as libraries, theatres and arts venues, is yet another layer of contraction and reconfiguration. While the focus of this ESRC-funded study emphasised retailing and high streets, it is evident that the global narratives cited above also affect other land use sectors, and, by extension, the overall economic viability and social vitality of town and city centres.

The complexity of the inter-relationships of economic and service activities and land uses, deteriorating environmental conditions and social change have contributed to the weakening of high street vitality and viability and result in high street change being conceived as a “wicked problem”. Following Rittel and Webber’s (1973) logic of “wicked

issues” demands a governance approach that is sensitive to the potential knock-on effects of policy interventions. In the context of town centre degeneration, taking a wicked issue approach means being mindful of the legacy effects of earlier interventions and alert to the potential unintended consequences of overly simple solutions that do not take account of the inter-related and dynamic nature of complex systems (Peel and Lloyd, 2016).

Social reconstruction: from down town to clone town

How contemporary problems of the high street and the state of retail are understood, talked about and addressed can be thought about using ideas of social construction. Understood as the way in which societies make, and convey, meaning, a benefit of adopting a social constructionist approach to understanding issues is that it emphasises that, in any given scenario, competing claims may be advanced and contested. For instance, Hannigan (2006) contends that, in terms of whether a particular environmental problem does or does not receive political or societal attention, and whether or not any action ensues, depends on a number of prerequisites being in place. Hannigan (2006) identifies scientific evidence as an essential requirement, but asserts that, on its own, evidence tends to be insufficient in mobilising change. He suggests that there are important roles to be played by popularisers and the media, and that dramatisation of an issue can serve to raise public consciousness and action in contexts where different issues are competing for public attention. Critically, Hannigan (2006) points to the need for economic incentives to bolster action and the identification of an appropriate institutional sponsor to legitimise intervention and action. For our purposes, we suggest reducing these different dimensions to populate the 4 Rs Framework presented in this special issue.

Four perspectives are appropriate in reconciling Hannigan’s (2006) thinking with the proposed 4 Rs framework for addressing high street change. First, in terms of *repositioning*, the nature and extent of the scientific evidence relating to high street and retail change is all important. Here, practical evidence relating to changing ownerships of chains, the position of independent stores, locational shifts and footfall is significant. Further, specific claims relating to the observed homogenisation of high streets – “clone towns” – as a consequence of wider processes of change has itself attracted critical attention from, among others, the New Economics Foundation (2010). Second, in terms of *reinventing* the high street, attention has been drawn to the need for new perspectives on traditional high streets which go beyond retailing to include services and affordable housing. The Portas Review (2011) is one example of these new debates, precipitating a formal central government response. Significantly, Portas (2011) has also simultaneously acted as a populariser of the need to take the high street more seriously by dramatising the shopping experience and providing an important advocacy role in terms of the need to actively reinvent the high street offer and experience through adopting new models and approaches. Here, it is suggested that the best spaces created from physical restructuring can enliven the high street and also shape a better image for the place which can further enhance retail operations (Pal and Byrom, 2003). Third, *rebranding* explicitly identifies a role for the media in changing mind-sets and attitudes, rebuilding reputations and offering new interpretations of a place. Finally, *restructuring* involves putting the necessary economic incentives and institutional arrangements in place to secure the appropriate planning and governance of the high street as a complex entity involving more than shopping. We can illustrate what this means in practice with reference to experience from Scotland.

Legitimacy for a reinvigorated approach to addressing high street change in Scotland was emphasised in a report by the External Advisory Group (2013). This report opened with a statement from the First Minister who claimed:

Town centres are the lifeblood of our communities, functioning as places of social interaction and enterprise. By diversifying our high streets we will make them even better places to live, work and socialise ([External Advisory Group, 2013](#)).

In promoting a diversified town centre first approach, the [External Advisory Group \(2013\)](#) emphasised a leadership role by public bodies who would be required to consider an inter-related range of issues with respect to how they can support town centres. These measures included not siting retail development outside the town centre, discouraging business relocation away from town centres and reviewing business rates to improve economic incentives. In terms of managing property and the social vitality of the high street, the [External Advisory Group \(2013\)](#) advocated broadening the appeal of town centres by expanding digital connectivity and strengthening the mix of leisure, public facilities and homes and working with housing providers to bring empty properties back into use and promoting affordable housing as part of a strategy for encouraging town centre living. Consequently, the major point of interest is how high streets can be *restructured* to facilitate all the changes mentioned above.

In short, a new social construction of both the high street, as one involving a diversified local economy and community, and new planning and governance arrangements necessitating multi-sectoral action, are important in driving and delivering resilient high streets and town centres. In contrast to conventional statutory retail planning, which tended to rest on regulation and the physical instrument of the sequential test in seeking to promote the town centre, this more sensitised thinking reflects a more nuanced appreciation of retail and high street change as collaborative governance. Hence, this holistic appreciation of the challenges to retailing and high street dynamics ([Warnaby *et al.*, 2005](#)) becomes the motif for the new planning governance regime required, involving integrated service provision through a particular model of community planning, which is itself strongly aligned with a clear articulation of the land use planning arrangements ([Pemberton and Peel, 2016](#)). The case for a positive social reconstruction of the high street, and the operation of town centres as more than shopping, has to inform a new local restructuring strategy based on deliberate and appropriate planning and governance arrangements involving the development of a shared vision which brings previously parallel policy and service activities together with local communities and business. In Scotland, this process of rethinking local governance to extend beyond formal government, and to involve the third sector and community enterprises, for example, has emphasised the value added by defining shared outcomes as a way to align different interests ([Peel, 2016](#)). In short, across the devolved UK, *restructuring* will involve context-specific ways for socially constructing and mobilising action so as to better join-up the planning and governance of the high street.

Planning and governance

Notwithstanding a turn to multi-channel governance, as opposed to state-led, top-down government control, there is still an important role to be played by individual statutory functions in the management and regulation of shared spaces. In terms of providing the institutional legitimacy and democratic space for devising and building shared visions for the development of defined places, the particular legal arrangements for land use planning are critical in dealing with private property rights, mediating access to the public realm and negotiating the parameters for land use change ([Sheppard *et al.*, 2017](#)). Critically, the land use planning system provides the legal framework within which decisions about the siting and design of new built form, as well as the protection of the historic environment and heritage, takes place. Locational decisions also involve coordination of access and mobility. Planning is concerned with managing the cumulative impact of development and sets

standards for the overall design quality. As such, planning plays a central role in the physical aspects of place and how the environment contributes to the well-being and liveability of individual places. However, market-led implementations of planning as a means to re-engineer spatial development for economic growth (Bafarasat and Baker, 2016), and the congested and complex landscape of planning arrangements means that technocratic and visionary planning “might mask some very real changes in strategic thinking about an area’s future development” (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2016, p. 49).

An important rationale underpinning the operation of the land use planning system, its framework of policies and the associated body of case law, is that it provides certainty and consistency in decision-making in relation to individual development schemes and offers an overarching and forward-looking strategic framework within which to guard the public interest (Sheppard *et al.*, 2017). Over time, there has been a concerted effort to strengthen public and stakeholder engagement in the preparation of local planning documents. Notably, this emphasis on collaborative approaches to forward planning activities has emphasised early engagement – or front-loading – of the planning process. As such, there is scope for civil and business communities to be actively engaged in, for example, the gathering and interpretation of evidence and devising of a shared vision. Important questions that arise in terms of how planning operates in any particular place at a given time are whether the particular governance structures in place are actively managing change and how well stakeholders are engaged in cross-service decision-making and action as envisaged by community planning (Pemberton and Peel, 2016).

The particular role of statutory land use planning in regulating high streets and town centres conventionally comprises allocation of land and property for specific uses and new development, granting of planning permissions for physical change, the use of planning conditions to control individual activities and regulating the change of use of premises. Retail policy has evolved over time with a long-standing emphasis on promoting the economic viability and social vitality of town centres through fostering an appropriate balance of activities and uses in what is held to be the public interest at any one time.

In terms of the overall management of town centre activities, however, since the early 1980s, there was a supplementary interest in town centre management as a way to deal with the perceived gap in coordination whereby infrastructural and management deficits were not “owned” by any one service provider or business interest (Worpole, 1992). In particular, the very public-ness of the town centre and the inherently symbiotic nature of high street functions, led to town centres experiencing what, elsewhere, has been identified as “the tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), whereby over use of the shared resource had overall detrimental effects. Related to this has been a concern, in some cases, with “free-riding” whereby certain interests have not contributed to the provision of communal resources (Warnaby, 2006). Initially devised as an informal approach to partnership working, over time alternative measures to high street and town centre management have then witnessed the development of more formal regimes, such as the business improvement district (BID) model. A move towards more contractualised relationships (Peel and Lloyd, 2008; Peel *et al.*, 2009) with respect to financing and coordinating different activities has led to new ways of organising and funding collective management of individual places.

It can be argued that these new forms of governance reflect an awareness that the functioning of high streets and town centres requires a greater sensitivity to the inter-related operating environment of local government, business and communities. This new thinking must reflect a recognition that a relatively narrow – or sectoral – appreciation of retail performance, for example, is inadequate. Following thinking in relation to resilience suggests that new modes of joint-working require an ability to respond to economic shocks

in the immediate term, ways of dealing with inherited deficits and conflicts, and a capacity to anticipate future shocks, such as those driven by technological advances. Although in very early stages, the explicit alignment of the statutory duties of land use planning and community planning in Northern Ireland, for example, is a striking example of new attempts at strategic planning across functions and diverse providers (Pemberton and Peel, 2016).

It follows that new models of leadership and collaboration need to be sensitive to identifying the potential synergies of high street and town centre dynamics, and with an ability to tease out the particular distinctiveness and relative positioning in the wider socio-economic environment. In other words, the restructuring of governance needs to reflect the diversity of the place mix and identify the appropriate partners, knowledge, capacities and skills. For example, the [External Advisory Group \(2013\)](#) made the case for a more proactive planning approach based on an integrated policy framework that brings together national, regional and local planning agencies, and local civic and amenity groups. In practical terms, then, sustaining vibrant local economies depends upon devising a model of complementary leadership involving local authorities and businesses. Similarly, if town centres aim to enhance their digital provision, this requires local businesses, community groups, local authorities and digital providers to cooperate. Likewise, if there is a vision of the town centre as a living – rather than (solely) a shopping – environment, then planners, social landlords, empty homes agencies and funders, for example, need to work together, alongside retailers. The next section draws insights from the specific cases studied as part of the High Street UK2020 project, drawing attention to process and plan aspects of planning and governance restructuring. Quotations are anonymised to protect privacy. Particular reference is made to Wrexham with respect to the development of a town centre masterplan which deliberately identifies overlapping strategies and how proposed town centre initiatives meet the Council's overarching plan for the area.

Insights and lessons from practice

As an applied project, High Street UK2020 sought to bring together relevant insights from theory to help address practical challenges on the ground. As such, care was taken not only to categorise areas where intervention was necessary but also, importantly, feasible. While three of the ten case study partner towns [Congleton, St George (Bristol) and Wrexham] focused in particular on restructuring, it is useful to note that participants involved in other approaches adopted under the project also highlighted aspects of planning and governance as key issues potentially inhibiting – or facilitating – effective action; therefore, we have also included reference to these in this paper. Particular insights relating to the challenges confronting town centre and high street change were articulated by participants during project workshops, and these are drawn upon here to illustrate the nature of some of the principal dilemmas identified. The findings are grouped under four broad themes (models of partnership working, nature of partnership working, roles and responsibility and planning and governance).

Models of partnership working

Different governance planning and governance models exist. In Altrincham, the pursuit of a BID model of governance had unintended consequences which involved a default reliance on the local retailers. On the one hand, this approach effectively divested collective responsibility across a sector. On the other, such a single sector approach weakened the breadth and diversity of the potential change agents. Eventually, a more inclusive partnership between the retailers and the civic sector evolved which went on to formulate a town centre neighbourhood business plan, using evidence from the High Street UK 2020

study ([Altrincham Business Neighbourhood Forum, 2016](#)). The referendum for this plan will be held in October 2017 and, if successful, the plan will be used to determine (legally) the future development of the town centre.

In Altrincham and in other towns, there was evident capacity to draw upon a civil society resource, that of an active volunteer force, amongst whom there was an evident enthusiasm to participate actively in effecting high street change: “We want to see change – and a vision is in the works. Some of these volunteers are looking to formalise action and create action plans”. Sometimes, new structures (such as the Altrincham Business Neighbourhood Forum) will be required to channel and support such energy.

In practice, governance forms may be a consequence of scale and strategic management. Hence, within a major city context, for example, there will be a number of high streets competing for limited resources. Degrees of engagement may (also) be relatively weak as a consequence. Moreover, and depending on the specific needs of the individual neighbourhoods within a city, it may prove difficult to generate a strategic approach to managing all the high streets which meet the particular needs of individual localities and communities.

One of these neighbourhoods that participated in the project was Bristol St George, which is one of 46 other retail centres across areas in the city. The key perception during the workshops was that there was a strong community feeling and willingness from the local people to be part of making changes. One of the recommendations from the academic team was to look at the development of an effective local partnership to establish a shared vision for Church Road. Partnerships such as St George Neighbourhood Partnership and Church Road Town Team were already establishing formal actions towards local business resilience and retail adaptation. These aimed not only to support local businesses but also towards building community via the encouragement of using local retail centres and businesses ([St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2015a](#)). The formulation of a Neighbourhood Partnership Plan also highlighted the local people’s aspirations to restructure St George and build links with other partnerships/initiatives around a new common vision for the area ([St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2015b](#)).

Recently, the formation of a new community-led organisation named St George Community Network aims to build upon the progress that has been made so far, and continue to act as a “community of community groups” that can speak up for the whole of St George and can improve the area’s identity. The new network will be run entirely by local residents and has already been able to self-organise to continue to pursue local priorities in the area despite reductions in central government funding ([St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2017](#)). It can be argued that local partnership working in St George has shown, and continues to show, great resilience and adaptation towards the challenges that can hamper effective local governance and planning of the area and its high street.

Nature of partnership working

Notwithstanding the case for new forms of collaborative governance, it is clear that developing appropriate models of joint-working brings with it certain challenges. It is also apparent that different models of partnership working have different implications. At the beginning of the project, one participant, for example, noted: “I feel that people are quite wary of the conflicts and arguments in X”, effectively pointing to potential relational difficulties. There was a sense that particular barriers existed which served to undermine partnership working in the town, including a lack of leadership, poor role definition, ill-defined partnership remit and unclear responsibilities. An implication of such a governance culture was then that there was a tendency towards inviting a top-down approach,

characterised as “Tell us what to do”. This governance culture had, it was felt, undermined the performance of the town, restricted communication channels and weakened the perceived legitimacy of the partnership. As a consequence, the potential input from wider stakeholders was effectively diluted, potentially weakening the available resource base. A common complaint among the partner towns was the feeling that decision-making and progress (and by default high street performance) are hampered by “inertia in mind-sets and people” (Parker *et al.*, 2014); therefore, there is an expectation that the style of new forms of partnership working must be more action-orientated.

Roles and responsibilities

As models of high street and town centre governance evolve, there is clearly a need to consider how different roles and responsibilities are defined and inter-relate. One case study participant observed: “The ownership issue is conflicting and thus place visions are unclear. A vision is more like a meaningless model when it’s not focused”. Devising effective divisions of labour is not always easy; however, particularly when new forms of governance extend beyond formal – or statutory – functions. One participant commented: “[...] It is about creating that retail connectivity [between the towns within the region], but some believe that’s the paid bodies’ job and not a volunteering thing”. A lack of coordination across different roles and responsibilities, as well as a lack of common goals, have been associated with other regeneration or revitalisation projects in both the UK and the USA (Mowery and Novak, 2016).

Mediating roles within this new governance framework appear to be necessary, with strategic partners playing an important role in coordinating inputs: “Retailers recognise slowly that all these actions are for the good. I have lots of interaction and there are great opportunities for the retailers to give their opinion”. In practice, however, perceptions about the extent of one’s individual input are likely to be highly personal and may depend, for example, on personal energy and enthusiasm. One participant put it this way:

I have my strengths and other people know theirs so everyone needs to be involved, because everyone has plenty of ideas; it [a business meeting] just doesn’t have to be a waste of time.

Planning and governance

In concluding this section, attention is paid to the work of Wrexham County Borough Council in North Wales where the 25 priorities for local action, identified in the UK High Street 2020 project, were used to support the development of a masterplan as part of the statutory planning process leading to the new local development plan (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016, pp. 75-76). Critically, this document was developed using wide stakeholder engagement. The masterplan began by declaring a “new normal” with respect to the role of retail within accepted models of town centre vitality and viability:

However, the previous model of retail continually driving town centre growth has broken, changes in modern retail, the way people shop and wider economic changes mean that town centre regeneration needs a different model, future growth will come from a greater diversity of town centre uses. (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016, p. 1).

The masterplan also asserted the important role partnership working had made in developing the vision. Notably, then, Wrexham County Borough Council (2016) specified a range of partners necessary to progressing the vision, comprising national government, local planners, other council actors and the private sector. The vision developed by this network of diverse actors identifies alternative future scenarios around complementary

themes based not only on shopping but also on visiting, living, working, attractiveness, distinctiveness and accessibility. While these themes may be found in many town centre or high street visions, the checklist of 25 priorities was ranked ([Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016](#), Appendix 10), offering not only a useful illustration of the thinking process involved in developing a future strategy but also validating the approach and identifying the related policy, practical, governance, implementation and delivery issues involved. A Wrexham Town Centre action plan has since been developed by the Wrexham Town Centre Partnership Steering Group in response to the HSUK2020 study. It was agreed that a single strategy was required that brings together all the Council's strategies and action plans relating to Wrexham Town Centre, clearly setting out the Council's priorities for making it a vibrant, safe, accessible and prosperous place for people to live, work and visit. Participants commented on the importance of the workshops in this process, and one of them highlighted that:

This [the Plan] arose as a result of a workshop where the university attended, meeting in the council chambers. They found there are 25 priorities and how we would tackle those. We broke up into small groups and started actioning things, such as street clean-ups, street festivals, and we influenced parking charges. We are recognising that the council have officers and members dealing with issues in the town centre, and we have many volunteers. We don't want to duplicate things and together we want to tackle things that need it and make sure that they are prioritised ([Wrexham.com, 2016](#)).

Conclusions and recommendations

There is a substantial evidence base in the research, policy and practice literature that high streets and town centres are undergoing processes of transformation. Retail(ing) and high street change have been constant issues, of which governments (local and central) have been aware but have been seemingly unable to deal with in a timely manner ([Kalandides *et al.*, 2016](#)). In parallel, state-market-civil relations are evolving. Models of governance then need to adapt ([Pancholi *et al.*, 2017](#)) to reflect changes in resourcing and public-private responsibilities with respect to safeguarding the public realm and building in adaptive resilience to withstand future shocks. Restructuring then involves new relations beyond formal government, resulting in evolving new forms of collaborative governance that potentially extend joint-working to involve multi-dimensional sectors and voluntary forms of action. Faced with such fast-moving and transformative change, councils cannot rely on their statutory planning processes to keep pace – so by being willing to work in a more consultative and collaborative way they can be influenced by a richer and more contemporary source of information and insight brought by a wider set of stakeholders (including, in the case of this High Street UK 2020 project, leading academics from five UK universities).

In this paper, we argue that despite an abundance of academic knowledge on governance and partnerships, problems in practice are very common. Therefore, it is important to bring knowledge to bear to these problems – in the way we have attempted to do. The impact this knowledge transfer process has had, as evidenced across this special issue, suggests that our approach has been successful. The most important conclusion we draw from the focus taken in this paper upon restructuring is that many towns have inadequate structures to manage change or encourage any action. Structures that were appropriate once may need changing or refreshing, like in the case of Wrexham where a more open forum, appropriate for building trust and inclusivity, had become unwieldy and more of a “talking shop” than a mechanism for decision-making and action. By having a thematic focus (one of the 4 Rs) and by acquiring the relevant knowledge, towns felt they could tackle an important issue –

something that was holding them back. In terms of restructuring, four broad conclusions from this engaged scholarship project may then be discerned.

First, addressing high street change of necessity involves selecting an appropriate model of partnership – or joint-working arrangement. Different models exist and these invoke a range of relational aspects which may involve different ways of working, engagement with diverse players with different cultures and mind-sets and a need to determine cross-scalar, strategic-local relations.

Second, the nature and mode of working of the selected partnership will vary according to the model and partners involved. Attention must be paid to the practical, structural, operational and relational dimensions of governance if partnership-working is to be nurtured and approaches to joint action for the benefit of the high street are to be secured.

Third, given the diverse constituency and operational environment of the expanding governance regimes, it is important to define clearly the remit, roles and responsibilities of the individual partners, and appreciate that actions and interventions are mediated by both functional role definition, and what may be identified as an individual's personal working ethos and emotional intelligence.

Fourth, the role of statutory land use planning in creating a resilient future for the high street remains a legitimate and democratic space for providing a leadership role, collating and prioritising the evidence base, and articulating options and joint strategies for change. Adopting participative methodologies such as engaged scholarship for the collation and prioritisation of the evidence base can serve to justify the work of new governance networks. Moreover, facilitating public debate around an alternative town centre vision can help build softer prerequisites such as trust and a sense of inclusion through soliciting local ideas and opinions, and enhance the resource base by identifying new change agents.

Finally, given the nature of the project, we end this paper with some practical recommendation for our town centre partners – as well as anyone else who is involved in regenerating the high street:

- Review partnership structures regularly – are they fit for purpose? Even functional partnerships can turn dysfunctional over time.
- Places are complex – no one structure is likely to manage all activity or make all decisions, so it makes sense to map out the partnership landscape. How do different partnerships, structures and organisations link to each other? How much duplication is there in terms of place management or regeneration activity? Where are the gaps?
- Often the ideology or working culture of the partnership will be influenced by who leads it (private, public or voluntary sector) – so a partnership working culture should be encouraged that suits everyone, rather than just adopting the procedures and processes of one partner.

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